

BLOSSOMING HOPE



A SILVER
LINING SERIES
BOOK - 3



LANE ANDERSON

Blossoming Hope

A Silver Lining Series

Book 3

Lane Anderson



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A Special Gift For You!

I wanted to give you a special gift just for joining me in this adventure to the past. Having you by my side is an essential component in this journey of conquering all my dreams as an author. I don't take you for granted, and I greatly appreciate your presence! So to say thank you, I am gifting you a Free Copy of **"Bound to be my Sweetheart!"** Get your free copy by clicking the image below or [clicking here!](#)



Kind Regards,
[Lane Anderson](#)

Contents

Title Page

Copyright

A Special Gift For You!

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Leave A Review

Join ARC Team

Blossoming Hope Book 3

Other Books by Lane Anderson

Chapter One

Columbus, Ohio
1918



Prolonged stares filled with utter disgust and disdain, a steady gaze coated with hurt and betrayal, and a broken heart once filled with the hope of a better life, Eric had to make a decision that would settle them all. But what could he do? He wished there was a way to be with Hope and still please his mother, but even in a thousand years, he didn't see that happening.

The open box in his hand revealed a twenty-four karat gold ring. They all stared with their mouths wide open. 'Had Anna come to stay?' many of them asked internally but didn't dare speak out.

Eric fixed his gaze at Diane once more. He could see the stress and worry in her eyes, and it made him feel discontent. She had gone a long way to ensure he ended up with who she felt was best for him and nothing more. And he was going to do just that.

Anna had been his prospective wife from the onset. How that had changed was all in the past. She was here with him and his children. There would be no crime in correcting history. Anna, it was. Sure, he'll have to deal with Hope a lot later. But at the moment, he prayed he was making the right decision.

Still on bended knee with his eyes anchored on Diane, he took a deep breath and continued, "Light, love and life, I have found in you. Happiness, joy, and good cheer are all you have brought since you came back into my life."

Alma's face became contorted with confusion as she tried to wrap her head around what was happening. She followed the direction of Eric's gaze and saw Diane at the stairway. She shook her head in disdain, saddened that her brother was not brave enough to make his own decisions when it came to matters of his heart.

By this time, Anna was already beaming with joy. She could see everything she wished for finally falling into place. That light at the end of the tunnel shone brightly. So bright that if she stared at it any longer, it would have blinded her—she was going to be Mrs. Burnett.

Eric shifted his gaze to Anna, and she hurriedly rose to her feet. She put her palm over her face and tried to control the tears that threatened to pour out. 'Anna, do not cry. You deserve this.' She said within. Nonetheless, she felt the need to let the tears flow just for dramatic effect.

How she had let herself get bothered about Eric's closeness to the nanny was beyond her. Of course, Hope was no match for her and would never be. Eric would always choose her. His childhood best friend. Diane had succeeded. She had won.

She was so lost in her thoughts she didn't hear when Eric popped the question.

He looked up at her expectantly, waiting for an answer, although he already knew what it would be. A simple 'yes' and the deal will be sealed for life. One word that would take away his freedom, take away his right to sole proprietorship of his home. One word that could inevitably send Hope away forever.

She looked at him, and he tilted his head to the side. "So? Will you?" He asked again and lifted the box close to her face so she could see it. It was just as she had described before she left for college. The ring he envisioned giving to her long ago. He remembered the exact details, down to how many karats she wanted.

Eric felt guilty about wanting to give it to Hope. It was Anna's dream, and he shouldn't have considered that.

A big rock glittered on the top of the setting.

"That must have cost all of our salaries for two months," Eric heard the cook whisper, and she responded with a small smile. She wasn't wrong after all. He wanted nothing but the best and went all out for it.

Hope was the one person who stood expressionless. She didn't know what to feel and how to even express it.

Anna sized Hope up and smirked before replying giddily, "Yes, Eric, I will marry you!" When she was calm, she stretched her left hand out for him to put the ring on it.

Eric sighed, but it was not a sigh of relief. It was a sigh that said, 'Lord, I hope I'm doing the right thing.' He took out the ring and slipped it into her ring finger.

Anna lifted her hand almost immediately and examined the ring closely. She hadn't seen anything so beautiful in her life. Yes, when she told Eric about her dream engagement ring many years ago, it was all her imagination. She never really expected it to come to life.

"Congratulations, Anna," Alma said from behind her. She was screaming inside that Eric was making a big mistake and wished she could let it out. This wasn't going to end well.

Anna turned and engulfed her in a hug, "Thank you so much, sister-in-law," she replied and kissed her on both cheeks. "I did notice you were busy all day, and I wouldn't have imagined it was for this. I mean, I thought you didn't want Eric and I together," Anna said and burst out laughing.

Alma gave a forced smile and then turned to look at Eric, "It's not

my life Anna. Eric can decide to do whatever he wants. The only thing I am here to do is support my brother. What kind of a sister will I be if I don't do that?"

Eric bowed his head in shame. He and Alma were going to have a long talk after this that was for sure.

Cries came from Hope's vicinity. Everyone immediately turned their focus to her. But it was Morgan who was sobbing uncontrollably.

"Why does he want to marry her?" He asked angrily.

Hope froze.

Anna turned to look at Hope with hatred filling her eyes. The rage in her stare screamed, 'I'm going to get rid of you soon, you just wait.' With Hope out of the picture, Anna awaited the opportunity to form a bond with the children.

"He didn't mean that. I'll take him to bed." Hope said as she struggled with both kids. Alice was in her lap, and Morgan was trying to climb onto the other side.

"Let me help you," Anna suddenly altered her snare and offered to assist.

Hope nodded and waited for Anna to come to her side.

The moment she came close to Alice, the toddler let out a loud cry.

"What did I do wrong?" Anna asked perplexedly.

"I don't know, Miss Anna," she sighed. "Miss Miriam, do you mind?" Hope asked desperately.

"Not at all, child," Miriam scuffled with her chair to oblige Hope's request.

She strode to where Hope stood and took the child from her. Alice followed her willingly, without any hesitation. They picked up the children's belongings and made way for the staircase.

It was there Miriam saw Diane; everything became clear to her. Eric intended to ask Hope to marry him if not for Diane's interference.

"Good evening, Mrs. Burnett," Hope greeted as she walked past Diane. She wasn't expecting a reply, so she walked past as fast as she could.

"Why are you in such a hurry, child?" Diane asked.

Hope froze. Diane had never addressed her in such a kind manner before.

"Um..." Hope tried to answer, but she couldn't find any words.

Diane chuckled, "Is the happiness at the table too much for you to handle?"

"That's it, Diane. Let the child go. Leave her be." Miriam said from behind her.

"And what made you think you could talk to me that way?" Diane shot back, attracting attention from those that were still at the table.

"With all due respect, Diane, leave the child alone. We are just

trying to attend to the children, your grandchildren. So if you wouldn't," Miriam countered and brushed past her. Hope followed directly behind her. She prayed silently that she didn't have to bear the consequences of Miriam's outburst later.

A soft melodious tune came from the piano, making Eric get up from his office chair, where he sat thinking. Pondering the life altering events that transpired just hours ago. He needed to see who was creating such wonderful music, and if his intuition was correct, it was the person he needed to talk to the most.

His doctor had given him a report on Rosemary Duncan's health, and according to him, she had not been there for the required test and post-surgery treatments which could be dangerous to her recovery.

He tiptoed to her side, scared that if she knew he was approaching, she would run away. Indeed, she had every reason to. But he just wanted to talk.

"Hello, Hope," he said as she slipped onto the piano bench next to her.

Hope was startled. She took her fingers off the keys and turned to face him. She wasn't expecting anyone to be awake at this hour of the night and just wanted time to herself. Her breath was hitched, and she didn't find words to reply. She turned to look outside the window at the green irises she had grown to love. Sadly, they did not bring her as much joy as they had done previously. Eric's love for her was just a figment of her imagination, and that was all it will ever be.

"Good..." she started and trailed. She wasn't even sure what time of the day it was. But she had to muster a greeting. A glance at the big clock hanging near the staircase told her it was a few minutes past midnight.

"Oh no. Good morning, Mr. Burnett," she finally greeted.

"It's a few minutes past midnight, Hope, and I don't think a greeting was necessary," Eric said as he looked past her at the clock. He turned his focus back to her and just stared. Taking in how beautiful she looked. Her long hair was beginning to grow even longer, he noticed. It had been a while since she had a haircut.

The bags under her eyes implied that she had not had a decent night's sleep in quite some time. It made him feel guilty, as if he was the one who put her in such a position to lose sleep.

"You look beautiful," he said without thinking.

Hope blushed but tried not to put too much thought into it. 'It is just a compliment just like he'd give any other person. It means nothing. He's just being nice.' she reminded herself. "Thank you," she replied.

'What if,' Eric began to ask himself but shook the thought off

almost immediately.

"I see you've gotten a lot better," he commented. "I listened to you play."

"I've just been practicing a lot," she replied.

"Even so, you're a fast learner," he complimented her. "You know they say, the older you get, the longer it'll take for you to learn something new. With you, it's quite the opposite," he said admiringly. "You're quick, and you've picked up playing the piano fast."

"Thank you, Mr. Burnett, for your kind words."

Eric nodded and continued, "Eric. It's Eric, Hope. You can call me that," he said and turned to look at the piano in front of him.

When she didn't reply after a few minutes, he decided that this was the best time to break the tension. "How is your mother doing? How is her health?" He asked.

Hope froze once again. She contorted a smile, "Rosemary Duncan is at the best Rosemary Duncan she can ever be," she replied gleefully.

But her response wasn't believable enough to deter Eric.

"Are you sure?" Eric pried a bit further. He heard news from the doctor himself and was certain Hope was hiding information about her mother.

"Yes, Mr. Burnett," Hope replied.

Eric turned to face her again. He read right through her eyes.

Hope did not realize how close he was to her. So when she looked up and saw him, she scrambled from her seat and ran down the hallway leading to her room.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Burnett. I must go...I think....I think I heard Alice crying," she said and laughed at herself for even bringing up such a stupid excuse; clearly, Alice was asleep just like everyone else in the house.

Meanwhile, Eric heard a low scoff coming from the direction of Anna's bedroom. He turned on the piano bench to face a fuming Anna.

'Oh no. What now?' He thought to himself.

Chapter Two



Eric had a rough time sleeping the past couple nights. His encounter with Hope on the engagement night played in his head over and over again. Talking to Anna afterward about what she had seen at the piano was too easy, and it bothered him. She didn't even put up a fight which was so unlike her.

"Thought of a date yet?" Anna asked.

"No, but we should be looking at some three months from now." Without looking up from the book he had in his hands, Eric replied, "That would be a great time to get married," he completed.

Anna frowned but didn't complain. If she was going to stay on Eric's good side, she was going to have to let him take things at his own pace.

Diane didn't think it was a good idea to let him do so, though. "Put pressure on him. Tell him you can marry him even without the glitz and glam," she told Anna the night after the engagement.

"And what plans do you have in mind?" Anna inquired.

"I don't know. That's why I need three months to think," he replied, still without looking up from his book.

Annoyed by both Eric's response and his indifference towards the issue at large, Anna snatched the book from his hands. She turned it over so she could see what he was so engrossed in.

The bold old Gothic letters read, "The Merciful Lender." Turning to read the blurb on the back, she grew to discover it was not a work-related book. It was a novel. A story that spelled out his situation with Hope as a matter of fact. She whispered, "How convenient," as she turned her head away from him.

"This is what is so interesting, right?" She smirked. She shook her head and rose from the desk. "Have a nice day, my love. I'll be sure to greet you when you return from work."

Eric felt a lot of things at once. He knew marrying Anna would be a problem, but he wished she didn't lash out at Hope because of his behavior.

Anna arrived at the pantry where Joanne was stocking the latest grocery haul. "Good morning, Miss Joanne," she greeted.

As much as Joanne didn't like her for Eric, she had to show respect to her as she would soon be the new mistress. It was inevitable. They were going to be married in three months, and it was going to be hell

for the staff.

"Good morning, Miss Anna," Joanne replied. "How are you? How may I help you?" Joanne asked courteously.

"I am well, thank you. I want to call a meeting with all the house staff. I request everyone to be in attendance. Can you arrange this?" Anna asked. By the tone of her voice, she wasn't giving Joanne a choice to decide. She was passing an order.

"Of course I can, Miss. But as it stands, we're going to have to check with all of the staff. As you know, we have designated duties, and we cannot just leave them at your call for a meeting."

Joanne tried to explain as kindly as she could. Anna had not yet married Eric, and she was already causing disruption to the daily order of things. She began to wonder what it would be like when they finally tied the knot.

Anna secretly gritted her teeth. If she wasn't so old, she would have given her a good tongue lashing, but she was Eric's favorite. Or so she wanted to believe. Nevertheless, Anna knew she was someone Eric cared for deeply, and she had to grant her the respect she deserved. "And what do you suppose I do in that case?" She asked.

Joanne thought for a while and began to answer, "Well, for a meeting that would interrupt the day-to-day operations of the house, I presume you inform the staff a couple days ahead of time. It is what Mr. Burnett does."

To say Anna was infuriated was an understatement. Even without much light in the dark pantry, you would see the fumes coming off her head. "But this is more of an emergency meeting. I must have this talk with the staff soon," Anna whined like a child.

Joanne was unfazed. She knew the kind of person Anna was because she witnessed her grow up alongside Eric. "Then you sort that out with Mr. Burnett. That's how things have been done here since our late mistress, Elaine," Joanne said with curtness. "Excuse me, Ma'am. I'll take my leave now. I have a lot of important things to get to."

Anna groaned, shocked by Joanne's audacity. 'Just another person to get rid of,' she sighed and walked out of the pantry.

Hope walked back into the mansion with Alice and Morgan, looking happier than ever.

"And I loved the way the clown came to me and poked my nose," Morgan said excitedly.

"He poked my nose, too," Alice said.

"Oh. And do you remember the big slide?" Morgan asked.

"The slide you didn't want to step away from?" Hope asked, smiling. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure I can't remember any of that. Your excitement has taken away all my memories."

"Oops," Alice said, and Hope laughed. She had grown attached to the children so much that she feared her departure which was approaching soon. It was just a few weeks until then, she reminded herself. A few weeks and she'll be free from Diane, Anna and most of all Eric.

"...the slide went swoosh..." Alice demonstrated dramatically. She had grown so much in the space of time Hope had been around. She was grateful to be able to witness her transformation.

If it bothered Hope that much, you could only imagine the burden Eric was carrying.

"Hope, are we going there again tomorrow?" Morgan asked. "I heard the funny man say we could come for the rest of the show."

"Yes, Hope," Alice added, like her contribution would make any difference. Hope looked down at her and saw her doe eyes. Although she had already decided that they would go again the next day, if Eric allowed it, she couldn't help but admire Alice's eyes.

"You're going to have to eat a lot of vegetables today if you want to go to the fair tomorrow. Are you willing to do that?" Hope asked.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" the children chorused, jumping at the same time.

"The first person to wash up gets one extra slide token tomorrow. Now run along, I'll be right there," Hope laughed as they scurried to the staircase.

She smiled in adoration. She couldn't wait to have kids of her own one day.

"And that is how you intend on raising these kids?" Anna asked from the dining room. Hope had not realized that she had an audience all along.

"Taking them to public places where they would meet with people of your caliber? I'm very certain Eric wouldn't like to know that his children have been out playing with street clowns," she smirked.

"Good day, Miss Anna. On the contrary, Mr. Burnett is fully aware we were at the fair today. I went there with his permission."

Anna sighed, "I don't know who you think you are, but in case you haven't caught up to recent happenings, I'll be marrying Mr. Burnett in three months. In three months, I'll be the official mistress of this house, and you will have to follow my rules."

Hope was surprised. She hadn't expected such outbursts from a woman who always seemed to keep her cool. "What do you want me to do, Ma'am Anna?" Hope asked humbly.

Anna smiled. This was a lot easier than she thought it was going to be. "From today, you're in charge of cleaning the children's rooms; their bathrooms are inclusive," she ordered.

"But Martha is in charge of cleaning all bathrooms, ma'am," Hope countered. "If you put me there, what will Martha do?" Hope said with

sympathy.

"Maybe I'll fire her," Anna said. "There are too many of you anyway."

"How dare you, Anna," another voice joined in. It was Alma.

Anna rolled her eyes. She could not believe that Alma was going to take sides with the maid once again.

"What is it that you think I am doing, Alma?" Anna asked. "I'm just assigning extra duties to our dear Hope. I mean, she is the one in charge of the children already. Taking care of their rooms should not be an imposition. Or is it?" Anna asked.

Hope shook her head. She didn't want to be in the middle of the banter that she was sure was about to occur.

"No, that is not a problem, Anna. But firing Martha? That is crossing the line. She has worked here for years. It's just wicked. Shame on you." Alma said.

"I don't think so, Alma. I think you should mind your business. This is Eric's house and not yours," Anna retorted.

Alma laughed, "Exactly! Now, what do you think is going to happen when Eric discovers your intention to fire a member of his staff without his permission?"

"It's okay, Miss Alma. The tasks aren't too difficult for me to handle anyway. It's not a big deal," Hope said, trying to lessen the impact of the argument. It wasn't healthy for them to be arguing so since they were going to be bound as one family in a few months.

"No, Hope, no. I will not agree to that. You keep your job and do what the description says. I'm going to have to talk to Eric about this when he returns from work this evening."

"I'm sorry about this, Miss Anna," Hope said and excused herself.

"She even disrespected your fiancé, and all you're going to say is that she apologized?" Diane ranted.

Eric sighed. He had just concluded the longest day at his job, and all he wanted was to come back to the sweet aroma of Hope's famous chicken soup and to relax.

"That was not the report I got from Alma and Joanne who overheard the entire conversation, Mother," Eric replied. He was tired. Too tired, in fact, to deal with any of this.

"You believe them over us?" Anna asked. "I can't believe this is coming from you, Eric," Anna said. "This isn't the 'you' I used to know," she said softly.

Eric coughed and got out of his seat, "You're right. This is not me. I had a long day at work. The Bank Commission came to do a thorough check and found several discrepancies within my department, now I have to take charge and sort everything out. I'd appreciate it if I could

get some rest as well as peace and quiet." He then made for the door.

Anna came to his side and hugged him. He tensed up initially but eventually let himself sink into it.

"You don't have to keep all your worries in. You can share them with me, Eric. You can tell me anything," Anna said, looking up at him.

Eric didn't look at her. Instead, he stared straight ahead.

Anna tugged at his shirt, so he was forced to look down at her. "Let's get married this weekend. It doesn't have to be a big ceremony. Having your family here is enough for me."

Eric sighed. He didn't want to make decisions without thinking them through properly. "What about your family Anna? They haven't responded to our letters yet. We have to be patient."

"Yes, yes. You're right," Anna said with gloom. "I'll help you run a bath so you can relax. Just give me one minute. I'll draw it now."

"Yes, thank you. I'd appreciate that," Eric replied.

Anna nodded and left his office to fix his bath just as she stated, leaving Eric with Diane.

"I see the way you look at the nanny, son. It's unhealthy for your relationship, Eric," she walked up to him and reached out to touch his face. "You made a mistake once. I'm sure you don't want it to repeat itself," she said, patted his cheeks, and walked out of the office as well.

A mistake? Was she implying that Eric made a mistake marrying Elaine? Diane never really liked her and didn't pass on any opportunity to show it. Eric believed she was somehow pleased when she heard the news of her passing on. But without proof, they were just mere accusations.

Chapter Three



Days went by fast at the Burnett mansion. With Hope a few dollars away from clearing her debt, Eric knew it was necessary that the search for a new nanny began. He intended to hire someone before Hope's time was over. So she could train them before her departure.

Or maybe, he could find a way to keep Hope around? He didn't know how he was going to achieve that. But he only had a short amount of time to figure it out.

"Hope? Are you in there?" Alma asked as she walked into Alice's room.

"Yes, I'm here. I was just trying to put her things in order," Hope replied. She would have let the maid take care of Alice's room on a normal day, but not this day. She felt obligated to clean it.

"How are you today?" Alma asked, smiling.

"I'll tell you that in two statements. One, after this month, my debt to your brother will be paid off completely, although I'll no longer be able to take care of Alice and Morgan. They mean so much to me; it will be difficult to leave them. Two, I'll know the results from my mother's treatment this week, and I'm really anxious about the results. That's how I am today," She said without pausing for even a second.

"And that's why you're cleaning Alice's room? Because you feel you'll never see her again?" Alma inquired.

Hope nodded sadly. Alma was the only one, aside from Joanne and Charles, who understood her in the Burnett mansion.

"You know that's not true," Alma tried to console her. But deep down, she knew it was the absolute truth. Sooner or later, Anna would take on the role of the running of the house, and things would never be the same.

If Eric does not control the power given to her, the chances that Joanne will still be here after their wedding are very slim.

"You know that's not true, Alma," Hope breathed out. "The moment they get married, the remainder of us are going to have a hard time here. As we speak, Charles is searching for a new job, and there's a great chance he will get three or more offers by the end of the month," she said and sat on the small table in the center of the room.

"Have you ever thought of a life without purpose or aim? You don't have anything to live for except people and maybe a small cooking job," Hope said sullenly.

Alma shook her head. She could not relate to Hope's position. Her life was planned out before she could even walk. Her parents had made sure of that.

"What do you want to do, Hope?" Alma asked.

"I just want to be able to take care of my mother. I want to get her the best life and treatment too. I want to be able to afford all of that without being indebted to anyone." Hope stated in frustration. She was tired of going in circles.

"Then stay here, Hope. Stay." Alma replied, then paused. She could see Hope's reasons for not wanting to remain in the mansion anymore, but the reasons she should remain were far more significant.

"That way, you won't feel so apart from Morgan and Alice. If Eric can handle it properly, my mother and Anna won't be in your way so often. You can save money while your mother is undergoing treatment at the hospital. It can work out, Hope. Your parents didn't name you that for nothing. You can't give up now." Alma expressed fervently. "Just think about it, ok?"

"I have given it much thought, Alma. But I don't see Eric being able to control Mrs. Burnett or Miss Anna. I'll just go back to working at Barter's Pot when my contract expires. It wouldn't be so bad there. The next nanny will surely have to order chicken soup for the children. I'm very sure about that." Hope giggled.

Alma laughed in response, "Speaking of which, I really need to know what you put in the soup that makes it so different from the rest. You have got to tell me," Alma said pleadingly.

Hope blushed in response, "Well, it's a secret recipe. Emphasis on secret."

The children were away to spend some time with Diane. Hope seized those hours to take a long-deserved nap. She needed to get rid of the bags under her eyes as soon as possible. Thankfully, there was less than a month left for her to return to her previous life. Not that she was so happy about it, she would miss the kids for sure and Eric, slightly. But this wasn't the path life had towed for her. Circumstances brought her a different journey.

There was a slight knock on the door, and she didn't waste any time in getting up to open it. For all she knew, it could be Diane with the children.

On the other side of the door, Joanne stood with a grin on her face. "Beautiful child," Joanne called to Hope. "I have missed your company this past week. I hope all is well with you."

Hope replied, mirroring Joanne's grin on her face, "Yes, Joanne. All is well. I just happen to have a lot going on that requires my attention outside the house. I hope I haven't caused any inconveniences so far."

Hope said apologetically.

"Not at all, child." Joanne waved her off. "That's nonsense. You can tell me whenever you have too much on your plate. I don't mind helping out."

"Thank you so much, Joanne. It means a lot to me." Hope replied, teary-eyed.

"Anytime, child. Anytime." Joanne said reassuringly. "By the way, Mr. Burnett requests your presence in his office. He has some important news to break to you," she told Hope.

Hope raised one of her brows in question. Hoping Joanne had an idea as to why he wanted to see her.

"Now, don't look at me like that. I have no idea what the meeting is about. Hurry along, now."

Hope sighed. She dreaded every opportunity to be in an enclosed room with Eric. "I'll be on my way."

"Easy child, easy. Everything is going to be just fine." Joanne patted her back and left.

"Thank you, Joanne. Do enjoy the rest of your day."

Hope smoothed the wrinkles off her dress and put on proper flat shoes. She walked to Eric's office and knocked on the door.

His deep sultry voice responded from inside, "You may come in."

She opened the door and walked in. "Good afternoon, Mr. Burnett," she curtsied. "I hope you're having a wonderful day."

Eric chuckled, "It would be a lot better if you would stop referring to me as Sir or Mr. Burnett. And call me, Eric, already."

Hope bent her head. She could feel a blush creep onto her cheeks. She didn't want to give Eric the benefit of seeing her that way. He had really changed since their first encounter. The Eric she met was a mean and arrogant man who wouldn't compliment her if his life depended on it. Now he's telling her to call him Eric. It was a beautiful thing to hear, but it didn't change the circumstances. Her departure was inevitable.

"You're my employer, Sir, and I don't think it would be appropriate for me to call you by your first name." Hope said respectfully.

"Does it really matter?" Eric asked. He didn't want Hope to see him as her employer anymore but as her friend. But as it stood, it wasn't likely that it would happen soon with her leaving in a few weeks. He knew his next course of action was drastic, but he had to do it. He was left with no choice.

"Okay, so. I sent for you in order to discuss your final terms of payment..." He started, but then there was a knock on the door.

"I'm quite busy. Come back later," he yelled. "Sorry about the interruption. As I was saying, the terms of pay-"

There was a knock on the door again. This time, accompanied by a

familiar voice, "Eric, my love. Can you open up? I have to tell you something important."

Eric sighed. He had tried as much as possible to be discreet about his meeting with Hope, but his efforts had proven futile.

"Come in, Anna," Eric said coldly.

She opened the door and walked in. "Hello, Hope. Can you give us a minute? If you don't mind, I want to talk with my fiancé. Thank you."

"Good afternoon, Miss Anna. That's alright. I'll take my leave, Mr. Burnett. Miss Anna," she curtsied and exited the room.

"Hope you can come and take the kids now!" Diane yelled from the patio.

"Bored of your grandchildren so soon, Mother?" Alma said as she approached her mother from the kitchen. She met Diane with a stone-cold expression on her face. Alice and Morgan didn't look too happy either.

"Is something wrong?" Alma asked.

"Yes, everything went wrong from the moment you stepped into this house. Everything is still wrong, Alma," Diane said spitefully.

"You shouldn't say such things in the presence of the children," Alma said gently.

Diane laughed, "Why not? They should know everything there is to know about their dear old Aunt Alma." She sized Alma up and continued, "Now that's the problem with you, Alma. You think you know it all. You think you've got your life all figured out. But that's not true is it? You don't know much about life. You are not acquainted with half as many people as Anna is. You have never been in a relationship, and you feel you can tell your brother how to run his home?" She paused to catch her breath and then shook her head in disappointment.

"You'd better go find yourself a husband soon. A high-profile one at that. You can't keep dwindling in your brother's affairs. You don't want to know what people around town have to say about you. You don't even want to know what I have to say about you."

Alma's eyes began to tear up. The truth is that she was engaged to be married, which Eric knew about. She didn't want her mother to know because he wasn't the kind of man she would approve of. Alma was afraid of the sort of drama it would insight if she discovered her secret.

Alma was so lost she didn't hear when Hope walked in to hug her. Morgan and Alice, sensing where the fault was coming from, rushed to Hope's side. Their eyes narrowed on Diane with a surge of irritation.

"It's all going to be fine, Alma," Hope cooed.

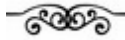
"Now that's another reason. You keep defending this one. And what does she give you in return? Nothing!" Diane yelled.

Hope bent her head low but still held Alma in her arms. "Mother, now that's enough. I've had enough of your rudeness. You must stop," she retorted. "Hope, I'm sorry about that. Why don't you take the children inside? I'll talk to you later," Alma said and disentangled herself from Hope's embrace.

Hope curtseyed, "Excuse me, Mrs. Burnett. I'll be on my way now," she turned, picked Alice into her arms, and took Morgan's hand in hers.

When Alma was confident Hope was away, she started, "Eric is my brother. I care for him. And I love him much more than you ever will. The only difference is that I don't try to control him. If my presence here is so disturbing, then maybe you should leave. One thing is for sure, Mother; I won't watch you lead Eric to his doom. I won't let you wreck him. You'll still be seeing me. I promise you that. So get used to it." Alma declared and stomped up the stairway to her room.

Chapter Four



Thirteen days, Hope counted. Thirteen days to the seventh of September. Thirteen days until she left the Burnett mansion for good. As she sat in his office, she began to reminisce on the few moments they had together.

In less than two weeks, it would all be over. Hope would only be seen in their memories. When Eric called her into his office, she assumed it was going to involve a conversation about her replacement.

"Now, Hope, I remember I said I have to talk to you. There are several things we must discuss. Now the first thing is going to be your paycheck for this month," Eric said, looking at her sheepishly. He knew that his next statement would cause unnecessary harm to Hope. But in his heart of hearts, he truly felt he had no other alternative.

"Okay, I'm all ears," Hope said, urging him to go on.

"Alright. Well, there might be a little challenge concerning that. I might not be able to pay you your entire salary this month as I am in dire straits at the moment. With the wedding planning, things haven't been going so smoothly. And to make matters even worse, the bank has cut my salary due to the discrepancies in my department. I've even thought about downsizing. I'm saying all this to say, you would need to stay on as the children's nanny for at least an additional month as you would still be indebted to me..."

Hope's head spun as the realization of what was unfolding before her eyes came to the forefront. She was going to be in his house for a while longer. 'No. This wasn't the plan. That is not what we agreed on,' she wanted to yell but couldn't find her voice.

The walls of the room seemed to be enclosing her. They drew nearer and nearer. 'You can't do this!' she wanted to shout, but nothing came out. She could feel herself losing consciousness. 'No, Eric, you're not going to do this to me. You can't keep me here. This isn't our agreement!' she continued to scream from within.

Above her, she could hear Eric calling for help, and the last thing she saw before she lost consciousness were his crystal green eyes calling her name.

"Hope. Hope."

Alma sat patiently by Hope's side while she lay deaden to the world. She felt the need to tell Rosemary about Hope's current

condition, but she knew Hope wouldn't want her mother to be disturbed.

"She passed out while we were talking," she heard Eric tell the doctor.

"What made her pass out?" The doctor inquired.

For a while, she couldn't hear Eric's voice, only muffled tones, then it came up again, "...and it's something we have talked about before today." He explained.

What was it that Eric didn't want her to hear? Alma began to wonder. She was going to wait patiently until Hope woke before she questioned Eric.

From his restlessness when she initially walked in, she felt Eric had done something terribly awful and was going to have a hard time forgiving himself for it.

Hope stirred in the bed. Alma got up immediately and rushed out of the room to get the doctor. "She's awake. She stirred in her sleep."

"That's a good sign. Thank you, Alma. Hopefully, it's just stress and nothing more. Let's keep our eyes open for other things, though. We can never be too sure. She needs to sleep for the rest of the day if that's okay with you, Eric," the doctor said and looked expectantly at Eric.

He shrugged, "That's very fine by me. I don't have a problem with her resting at all. I'll just have to relay this information to the other staff members who aren't around. Can you do that for me, Joanne?" He turned to Joanne, who held a tray that contained a cup of warm herbal tea with slices of lemon and a plate of cookies.

"As soon as I drop this in there, I'll get to it," she said and walked into Hope's room.

"Thank you, Joanne," Eric said as she walked into the room. "Don't worry about my mother and Anna. I'll share the news with them myself."

"Alright, Eric. Stay strong. She's going to be fine," Joanne said encouragingly.

Eric had more pressing matters than the rest of the staff to worry about. Diane and Anna. It was time for him to stand up to them, no matter the outcome.

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"What happened, Eric?" Alma asked as she entered the garden. It had become Eric's favorite place to be any time he had something on his mind.

"With Mother and Anna?" He asked. Then he continued, "Surprisingly, they took it better than I expected. Mother had her usual snarky response, saying Hope might have faked it and all but with Anna's help, I won her over."

"You shouldn't feel indebted to her for that, Eric. Just because Anna's in Mother's good graces."

"I'm not sure, Alma. You might be wrong there. Not everyone would be able to convince our mother to take it easy on Hope, and you know that. Even I know that."

Alma thought for a while before answering, "Yeah, I guess that's true."

"Now, I'll give her a little credit. Sometimes, it seems Mother loves her more than she loves us. I've felt that way since we were kids. Remember when we'd go out to play. Causing all sorts of damage to Mother's small farmhouse? Do you remember how she'd only punish us both and not Anna?" Eric posed as he reminisced about childhood memories.

Alma laughed, "No, silly. That was not because she didn't love us. We are her children. Of course, she loves us. But Anna is the daughter she's always wanted since I was a grave disappointment. Remember it was you who started playing in the farmhouse in the first place, and not Anna. So technically, it was totally all your fault."

"That's so not true," Eric said blankly.

"But that's exactly what it was," Alma replied.

Eric sighed and zoned out. Alma felt the urge to ask about his conversation with Hope again but decided against it.

Eric chuckled, letting out a long exhale, "It's going to be different without her around," he said.

Alma read through those lines quickly. She knew exactly who he was referring to. "So don't let her go," she said. "I mean, we did talk about this in this very place some weeks ago," Alma reminded him.

"I do remember that," Eric said sadly.

"Yes, and then you went in there and put on a whole different show," Alma said and waited for him to explain himself.

"It was Mother. She wouldn't let me be. And I didn't want to disappoint her. I wouldn't hear the last of it. But I don't want to lose her, Alma. I truly don't."

"Then don't lose her. Fight for her. Stand up for what you want. You experienced the same issue when you wanted to marry Elaine against her wishes. It is time for her to return to her own home."

Eric shook his head gently. "Then how do I go about this? I don't want Anna to leave either. I can't betray her a second time."

"Then let Hope go. Just let her go, Eric," Alma sighed, patted his shoulder, and started to walk away when Eric held her hand.

"I'm sure you're curious to know why she fainted earlier. I can't wrap my head around it either. I didn't think she was really eager to leave us so soon," Eric said in a rush.

"Did I really cause this?" He asked. "I mean, we were just having a

conversation, and then she began to clutch her chest as if she was fighting for breath," he explained.

Alma looked at him squarely, "What did you say to her, Eric?"

He clutched his head with his hands and began to talk, "I told her I do not have enough money to pay her for the month, and so I'd have to cut her salary. Meaning she'll have to work at least one additional month to clear her debt."

"Oh Eric, the poor girl is already having a hard time with her mother, paying for her treatment, making sure she is healing properly. Now you put this on her too? Maybe, you don't deserve her." Alma shook her head in disappointment. "You need to tell her it was a lie as soon as possible. Let her go, Eric. It's for her own good and yours as well. You've really gone and done it now, brother. You need to make this right."

Eric inhaled and said, "I know. I know. I'll fix this somehow."

Alma shook her head. She couldn't stand by idle while he took his precious time to contemplate his next move. "You're not thinking about it, Eric. You're going to do it," she said with a tone of finality. "As a matter of fact, I'm going to tell her she's free to leave."

Eric's face sunk. He was struggling with his emotions, they were all scattered out of place. He didn't know what exactly he was feeling. Sadness? Loneliness? Anger? Loss? He couldn't place what it was, but he knew the feeling was worrisome.

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"I need to leave this place as soon as possible," Alma heard Hope say as she stepped into her room.

"That's not going to be a problem anymore, Hope," Alma said. "The new search for a new nanny will begin tomorrow. You'll have to spend three days with her after that, and you're free to go," Alma said while stroking Hope's hair.

"Really?" Hope asked excitedly, her anxiety calming by the second.

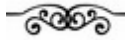
"Yes, Hope," Alma said sadly. She had grown fond of Hope's presence. Seeing Hope there every day made her feel like God had given Eric another shot at a great life. But all that seized the moment Eric put her life in danger. She couldn't risk losing her over Eric's indecisiveness.

Her breakthrough was finally here.

"Thank you, Alma" she placed her right hand over Alma's free one. "I'll never be able to repay you enough."

Alma didn't say anything. She didn't tell her not to worry about the money. She just looked at her with love.

Chapter Five



It had just been a day since Hope left the Burnett mansion. Just twenty-four hours since, Eric heard the subtle yet sweet melody coming from the piano. Twenty-four hours since Hope tucked Morgan and Alice into bed, and yet all hell seemed to have let loose.

Since it would have been impossible for Hope to leave the children without being seen during the day, Eric arranged for her belongings to be taken to her apartment the following afternoon, allowing Charles to take her home while they were all asleep.

Hope gently kissed them goodbye and left not long after they had fallen asleep. To prevent any form of intimate interaction between Hope and Eric, Diane and Anna escorted them to the patio to oversee her departure.

As Eric approached the car, not minding the presence of Diane and Anna, he reached out to help Hope open the door. She slid inside and he shut the door. She looked out of the window and waved at everyone who stood outside, including Alma, Diane, and Anna. The staff and Alma all waved back with sadness while Diane and Anna stood paralyzed with delight.

"It was for everyone's good," Alma said, and Eric hoped she was right.

But Alma was not right.

Morgan refused to eat all day and Alice had a burning fever hence why she had been crying all day. And Eric had not come out of his office since he went in this morning.

Joanne was tired. She didn't know what to do. After such a long time, she decided to reach out to Miriam.

"Charles!" She yelled from inside the house, "Charles, I need you in here. Come quickly, please."

Joanne could hear footsteps before he replied, "I'll be right there, Miss Joanne."

Joanne wiped her hands on her dress. She thought about sending Charles to fetch Hope from her apartment, but she had to respect her decision and let her out of this chaos.

The noise in the house was driving everyone insane. Anna came down to yell at the new nanny—Linda—who just realized how exasperating her new job was. Throughout her training with Hope, she learned how terrific she was with the kids, but she hadn't realized how intolerable things could get in her absence.

Even Charles, who always kept to himself, had begun a beautiful friendship with her, and it was difficult for him to accept that she was no longer with them.

"Miss Joanne, you called for me," Charles said as he finally reached the house.

"Yes, yes I did." Joanne paused. With her chin in her left hand, she looked around. Morgan was hanging on the arm of a chair in the living room. While Alice was rolling on the floor. "The children first," she muttered under her breath.

She began to weigh her options. Without warning, she stormed into the kitchen, returning with a piece of paper. She picked up an ink pen and scribbled a short note onto it.

"I want you to take this letter to Miss Miriam's house. Wait there for a response. Tell her it's as bad as it reads. Hurry." She ordered.

In what seemed to be a few minutes but was actually a couple hours, Charles returned with Miriam.

"Thank goodness," Joanne said as Miriam stomped into the house.

She scanned the place for the children and saw them in the sitting area. Alice was no longer rolling on the floor. She sat with her legs crossed, eyes closed while pulling her hair and crying at the same time. Miriam had never witnessed such a tantrum from Alice.

Miriam picked her from her back. Thinking it was Hope who had picked her, she became quiet for a few seconds. When Miriam turned her around in her arms, she came to realize the arms that held her did not belong to Hope. She began to wail even louder. She struggled out of Miriam's arms and dropped back onto the floor.

Morgan was worse. Any attempt to get him off the arm of the chair resulted in fierce swinging of his legs which prevented any one from removing him without harm.

Tired of all the constant commotion, Anna strolled downstairs and came into the living room where everyone was.

"What's the matter?" She came down to Alice as gently as she could. She tried several times before, but the child just did not warm up to her.

Every attempt failed to grow closer to her. Lastly, she reached out to hug Alice, which only resulted in her wailing even louder.

She walked to Eric's office and knocked on the door. There was no response, so she rammed the door with her foot. He still didn't budge. He didn't bother to react at all.

"Eric, I know you're in there. Can you come out? We could use your assistance. At least see to your children, you might be able to calm them." She said in a rush.

Anna never assumed it would be this difficult without Hope. But the better half of her told her that Hope had cast a spell on the

Burnett family. And the only one that was strong enough to overcome it was Diane. The rest of them had fallen prey to her wickedness.

"Eric, I really don't know what you're doing in there that could be more important than your family. But you need to come out now. I haven't been able to sleep all day because of the cries of these children," she hoped that talking about her discomfort would make Eric come out of the office, but she was wrong.

Too frustrated to keep standing at Eric's door, she made her way into Diane's room.

"If it's to talk to that boy, I've done that already. I don't even want to go down there. The chaos is too much for me to handle." Diane stated as Anna stepped into the room.

"What do I do then?" Anna asked exasperatedly.

Diane signed, "I have no idea, Anna. This is your home now. You wanted Hope gone, and finally, she's out. Take charge of it. All that is up to you," Diane explained.

Anna could not believe her ears. Diane always promised that no matter what, she would stand by her side to defend her. But right when she needed her the most, those promises did not hold water.

Anna shook her head pitifully. "You're just like your son. You are both cowards. What's it going to take for him to come out of that office and act like a man?" Anna shouted angrily.

"Now, young lady, you do not speak to me in that manner. I won't tolerate it or hear of it," Diane thundered. "All I wanted was for my son not to end with some bloodsucking, gold-digging peasant! My job here is done. Yours, my dear, is just beginning."

Anna swallowed hard and ran down the stairway, and she didn't stop running until she reached the stained glass on the front door.

She briefly rested on the porch and began to analyze her life. She put her whole life on hold for this man. She slid down the door in her burgundy one-piece skirt until she hit the floor. But suddenly, she quickly regained her confidence. Saying to herself that it didn't matter if Diane or anyone else thought she wasn't worth Eric's love, she believed that she was worth every bit of it.

She was going to fight for what she wanted.

As some time passed, Eric hoped that the children would eventually calm down and heed instructions, but that desire seemed highly improbable.

He was devastated. He was exhausted. He wanted to rest and ignore the cries of his children but couldn't do so any longer. What would Hope think of him if he did such a thing?

He finally decided to desert his office. Fed up with their tears, he concluded that his children needed to see Hope. He needed to see

Hope. He needed to beg her to come back. Not only for the sake of the children but for the sake of his ever-growing feelings towards her.

He was going to own up to his feelings for Hope to everyone. He was already tired of bottling them in, and as much as she needed a break, he needed to break free from his mother's control.

Eric went downstairs and entered the living room, where all the uproar ensued. Some of the staff sat with their chins in their palms, while others held their head on thighs as Joanne paced about unsure of a beneficial plan of action.

He couldn't begin to imagine how hard this had been on Joanne. She looked so relieved to see him.

Eric scooped Alice into his arm, who was back on the floor wailing and kicking. "Shh," he whispered into her ear. "It's all going to be fine," he told her, her cries immediately died down to muffled sobs.

Morgan, who was still hanging on the arm of the chair, had slept off. It must be particularly hard for him to lie in such a position.

"I want to see Hope," Alice said as she laid her head on her father's chest.

"Alright, princess. You're going to see her very soon," Eric said as he walked to where Morgan laid.

"Okay," Alice said and put her right thumb in her mouth.

Taking on what she was doing, Eric turned to Linda and asked, "Has she had something to eat?"

Linda shook her head. Eric knew that the only time Alice sucked her thumb was when she was hungry.

"Sweetie, do you want to eat something," Eric whispered into her ear.

"I want to see Hope. She will give me my food." Alice whined.

As if on cue, Anna walked into the living room from outside.

"Thought you were just going to stay up there forever. Did you not hear your children crying?" She spat.

Joanne jumped in before Eric could say anything. "Now, young lady, this is neither time nor the day for you to be spiteful. Give Eric a break. Go ahead back outside and clear your head." Joanne looked at her sternly.

Anna shook her head, "You see this? This is what happens when you give a maid such authority in your home. Aren't you the man of the house?" She questioned Eric.

"Stop right there, Anna. Joanne has worked here since we were kids. She oversees the running of affairs in this house. You will not talk about her in that manner."

Anna was seething, "Well, it's good to see you have not forgotten how to be a man. Hopefully, you haven't forgotten how to be a father either since that good for nothing nanny has charmed your kids with

some sort of street magic so they can't love anyone else but her."

"What do you mean, Anna?" Eric hurriedly replied.

"Oh. I mean, exactly what I said. She has blinded your children so much that they don't know what a good person is when they see them," Anna said proudly with her nose in the air.

Eric knew he should not be doing this in front of an audience, but he couldn't find a better time.

"And you're what is good for them, Anna? You begged me on several occasions to send Hope away, and now she's gone, you're not even making an effort to attend to the children. That really speaks well of you, Anna. It really does!" Eric yelled, making Alice who had drifted to sleep, spring up.

Anna smirked and sized everyone in the room up.

"You know what, Anna? I'm done. Done." Eric announced and made to walk out of the house, leaving no room for her to argue. He retraced the steps he had already taken and walked back to where he previously stood. With the hand that was not holding Alice, he kindly requested his ring. "I'll be needing that back," he proclaimed while pointing towards her engagement ring.

"You're going to come crawling back when she refuses to love you, Eric, you sure will. But I'll refuse to take you back." Anna stated, her eyes flooding with tears.

Eric scoffed and walked off without uttering another word. Joanne followed behind him and asked, "Eric are you going somewhere?"

"Yes, Barter's Pot. Can you please ask Linda to prepare Morgan?"

"Right away," she replied, and in two minutes, Linda came running with Morgan in her arms and Charles following close behind them.

Charles raised his brows inquisitively since Eric had not given any specific instructions yet.

"Barter's Pot," Eric ordered sternly.

When they got to Barter's Pot, the small parking lot was filled to capacity. This could only mean the inside was busy with hungry customers. Eric disregarded the crowd. He was going to make sure that Hope came back to them.

He waltzed into the restaurant, Alice and Morgan following close behind him. Soon she came to the front counter. As she appeared, he dropped down on one knee. People gasped all around. Wondering why this man had fallen to his knee. Surely he must be hurt or ill.

He hadn't fully seen Hope's face yet but had studied her hair well enough to know it was her.

"Hope, you don't fail to represent your name well. You came into my life like a whirlwind. I didn't expect to grow fond of you. But you showed up out of nowhere and changed my life forever. Not only my

life but my children's life as well. My feelings for you grow stronger and stronger with each coming day; my heart regrets not choosing you. I pray you find it in your heart to forgive me. I'll spend the rest of my life making sure you are my top priority. You'll never be secondary ever again. I promise you this." he let out a long exhale.

"Dear Hope," he started; at that instant, she looked up. All along, she hadn't realized what was going on around her. Her fierce ice blue eyes met with his crystal green eyes. She was confused, shocked more to say.

She looked more beautiful than she did yesterday, Eric thought to himself before awkwardly popping the question.

"Will you marry me, Hope Duncan?"

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